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Biography of a Church

Lois A. McIntosh

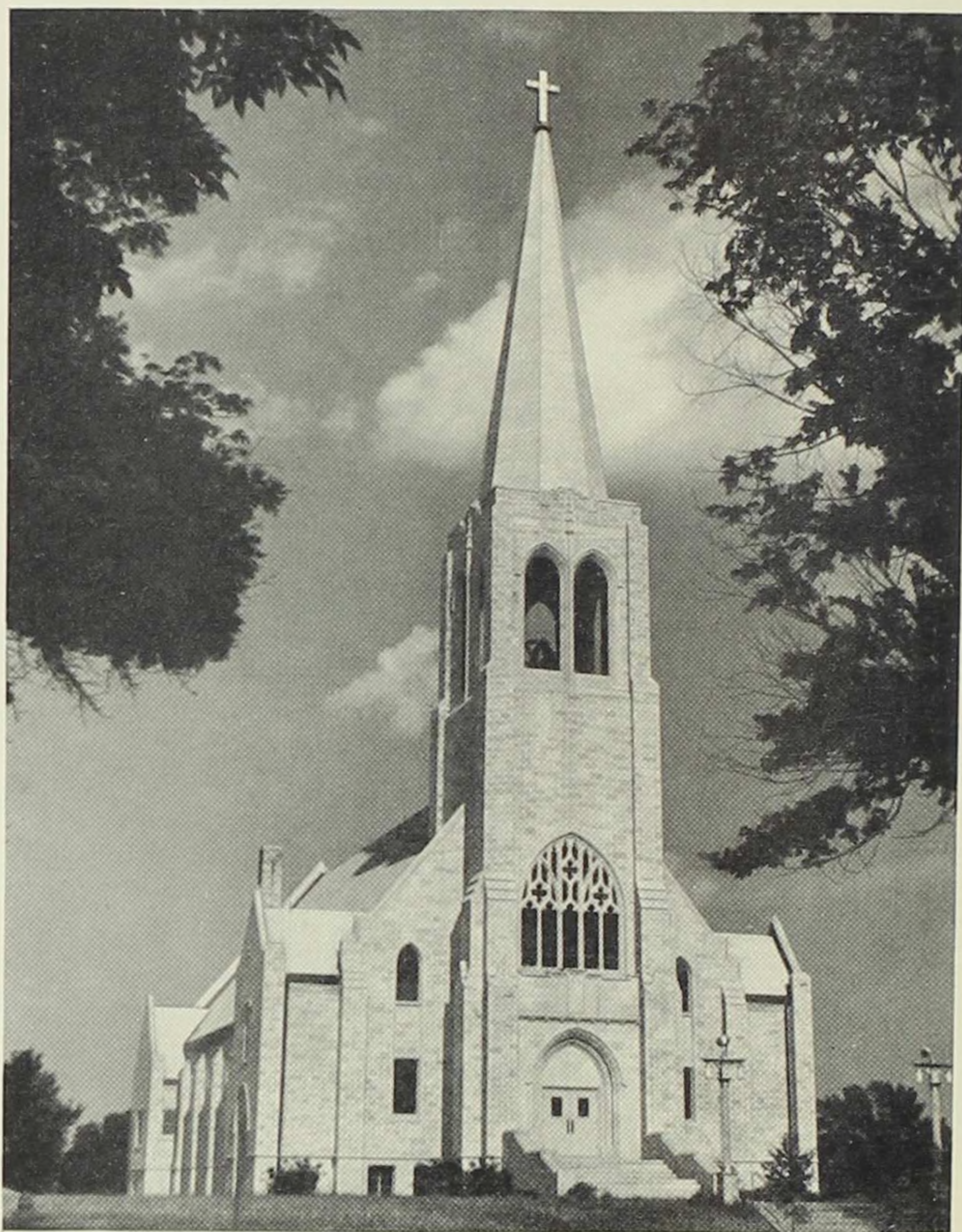
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MAMRELUND LUTHERAN CHURCH STANTON IOWA

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Biography of a Church

The Sweden of the 1850's did not offer a very bright outlook for its common people. The large estates were operated under a "torp" system which gave employment to a large number of under-privileged men and women. Under the "torp" set-up, a peasant had a small cabin, usually in a remote part of the estate, and a meager plot of ground on which he and his family could plant grain and vegetables for home use. For the privilege of cropping this plot and occupying the cabin, the tenant agreed to perform so many days' labor in the fields and about the grounds of the estate. The work was all done by hand, with spade, hoe, and scythe, and the hours were long.

It was no wonder these workers listened eagerly to the stories of opportunity and freedom in America. The States of Illinois and Minnesota attracted the first streams of immigrants from Sweden. Some of the earlier immigrants crossed the Mississippi River and located in Jefferson

County, Iowa. The place selected for their new home was hilly and wooded and not particularly adapted for the kind of farming the more fertile treeless prairie offered, but the resemblance of the terrain to the Sweden they had left may have guided them in their choice. They called the place New Sweden. The railroad caused a number of Swedish families to locate at Burlington and a Swedish Lutheran congregation was organized there in 1859. In 1864 the Reverend Bengt Magnus Halland, recently ordained a minister in the Augustana Synod, was called to take charge of the Burlington congregation.

The ceaseless stream of immigration with its innumerable covered wagons impressed this twenty-seven year old man who had been born in the province of Halland, Sweden, on October 15, 1837. He began to wonder about the religious future of these settlers. Would it be possible to formulate some plan by which at least his own countrymen could be brought together in a congregation of their own faith? Finally he approached the men in charge of the land sales at Burlington with the proposition that he be allowed to select a tract of land along the railroad on which he would seek to settle Swedish home-seekers.

His plan evidently met with favor, because

sometime later he set out to view the land adjoining the new railroad in quest of a location for this laudable enterprise. His final selection embodied the tract of land between the West Nodaway and the East Nishnabotna rivers in Montgomery and Page counties.

That this was a wise choice was proven later as the result of a survey undertaken by an eastern university to find the place in the entire world best suited for general farming purposes. The selection as finally made embraced a tract within a radius of fifty miles of Clarinda, Iowa. The location chosen by Rev. Halland is close to the center of this area.

Since the primary ambition of Reverend Halland was the establishment of a church home for his countrymen, he began the quest for the site for his church as soon as the railroad company had platted the new village in Montgomery County. He wanted the church building to be seen far and wide, bearing witness to a workaday world of the Savior of mankind. He had no funds to build a church but he did have a site, for the railroad company had donated two lots for this purpose. These lots, the initial contribution to the church, were on the highest part of the site laid out for the new town.

The question of naming the town came up in

1869. Rev. Halland suggested that it be named Halmstad, after the leading city in the province of Halland, Sweden, his former home city. This name was too much of a tongue twister for the New England gentlemen who were the sponsors of the new railroad and they decided that the town should bear the name of Stanton.

The first religious service in the new settlement was conducted by Rev. Halland at the camp of the pioneer settlers. The people sat on the grass on the side of a hill amid the flowers, clouds drifting overhead, and the prairies encircling them. Perhaps this setting brought to the minds of the people that gathering on the hillside when the Master spoke to the people, guiding and inspiring mankind. Every Sunday after that, Rev. Halland held services in different parts of the settlement and on May 25, 1870, the Mamrelund congregation at Stanton came into being. The name came from an association of the fine grove of trees on the townsite with the story of Abram and the Oaks of Mamre.

At first, services were held in the homes of the immigrants, but one Sunday morning the floor supports of the dwelling gave way, almost causing a tragedy, and the forty-one charter members decided that a church must be built. At a meeting held in October, 1870, the congregation decided

to build and a Mr. Olof Olson was appointed to have charge of the construction; by Christmas the building was enclosed. It was forty feet long and thirty-two feet wide, with a small addition for sacristy and tower. The spire was to be ninety feet high. The church was provided with a temporary altar table and a pulpit. Planks resting on nail kegs at first served as pews. Lack of funds delayed its completion until 1875, when the Iowa Conference of the Lutheran Augustana Synod of North America held its meeting in Stanton. The cost was approximately \$3,000.

The congregation was not large during the first years. On the first of January, 1873, it numbered only 133 communicants, and the entire membership was 229, but by January 1, 1876, it had increased to 300, counting children to 562. In 1883 the communicant membership was 571 and the total congregation included 994 persons.

A survey of the spiritual condition and development of the congregation during this period indicates that in the main the pioneers brought with them to the new home a reverence for the word of God and a respect for the ordinances of the church. Infants were presented for baptism as early as possible and members gave the required notice of their intention to partake of the Lord's Supper.

For thirteen years Rev. Halland shared with the struggling settlers the endeavor to build here in the wilderness the community he visualized. On foot and on horseback, in fair weather and foul, kind, patient, and forbearing, he struggled towards the goal he had set for himself. As part of his pastoral duties he planned and established a home for destitute orphan children in this new settlement. But, as the years passed, Rev. Halland felt that after this long period of service in and for his beloved church he should ask to be released, and he submitted his resignation at the annual meeting held in January, 1883. The resignation was accepted and on July 22, 1883, the beloved pastor preached his farewell sermon. The next few years found him working about the community and surrounding territory until his death on August 17, 1902. He was buried in the Mamelund Cemetery.

The new pastor who arrived at Stanton in September, 1883, was Rev. Anders Johan Ostlin, born in Sweden on September 20, 1848. His father was a sergeant in the Swedish army and an earnest Christian. Anders emigrated to America and came to Paxton, Illinois. Later he entered Augustana College and in 1877 he was graduated from the Theological Seminary at Rock Island, Illinois.

It fell to the lot of Rev. Ostlin to supervise the building of the second Mamrelund Church. Plans were adopted at a meeting held on January 15, 1884. According to this plan, the new church was to be 100 feet long (not counting the tower extension) and 60 feet wide with walls 24 feet high. A beautiful tower and a spire were included in the plans. The tower extension was to be 20 feet square, eight feet inside the church building and 12 feet outside.

The plans called for a church built of stone and quarries on the farm of John F. Johnson, southwest of Stanton, still known as the "Stone" Johnson farm, furnished much of the building material needed. So much labor was required to quarry, cut, and haul this stone that it was finally decided to use wood in some places and the heavy sidings were of wood trimmed and grooved. Eighteen carloads of lumber and 109 kegs of nails were hauled up the hill to the building site before the church was completed. I. Alfred Isaacson prepared and lettered the cornerstone. This beautiful church building was to serve the community for the next 55 years.

The new church became a busy place. Rev. Ostlin had taken an active part in the construction of the building and he was a leader in the community as well as in the church. Young and ener-

getic, he dressed well and carried himself with dignity, especially in the sanctuary. Older persons recall that he used to walk up the aisle in stately fashion carrying his silk hat tilted against his breast. He was a good horseman and took delight in driving a good team.

He did not approve of the custom then in use in many churches of all the men sitting on the right side of the sanctuary and all the women and small children on the left. He insisted that fathers ought to help care for the restless little ones and if necessary take them outside. His sermons were short and to the point. In those days there was no language problem; Swedish was used exclusively both in the church services and in the Sunday school.

During this period about 400 children attended the parochial school and Sunday school and the Mamrelund Lutheran congregation included about 570 confirmed members. The main organizations were the young peoples' societies. The congregation in those days was divided into routes, four in the country and one in town. The young people were gathering money for a pipe organ by the way of coffee socials, concerts, auctions, and oyster suppers. Even a necktie social was held. The community centered around the activities of the church and there it was that relatives and friends

from all parts of the congregation met after services, visited, and exchanged news.

On July 15, 1894, Rev. Ostlin gave up his pastorate at Stanton and moved to the First Lutheran Church in Kansas City, Missouri, but when he died on February 21, 1920, his body was returned to Stanton for burial in the Mamrelund churchyard cemetery.

The Rev. J. E. Rydbeck was called to be Rev. Ostlin's successor, beginning his ministry in Stanton in December, 1894, at the age of twenty-five. During his ministry in Stanton, a home for the organist and the teacher was erected on the church grounds, the present parsonage was built, the first pipe organ was installed, and the Young People's Society was reorganized into a Luther League. To the regret of the congregation, Pastor Rydbeck resigned on February 28, 1903.

His successor was Rev. C. A. Randolph, who wrote of his pastorate: "The seven years in Stanton are to me the most interesting years in my life. It was with trepidation that I accepted the call from Mamrelund. Would they be able to hear me? Did I have the talents to minister to an eight-hundred membership? The fear of not being heard when in the pulpit soon vanished and I found that the needs of a large church are the same as a smaller church."

A rather amusing incident happened when the organist resigned. The task of playing at the service the following Sunday fell to Mrs. Randolph, who had never played a pipe organ. After the service Rev. Randolph said to his wife: "You played just as well as I preached." She responded quickly: "Nej, gick det sa daligh?" ("Did it go as poorly as that?")

When the church needed repairs—re-decoration of the altar, a metal ceiling, and a new pulpit—Rev. Randolph took upon himself the job of personal solicitation and obtained the best collection that had ever been taken in Mamrelund. The artist decorator asked Randolph what he should do with the altar painting. Rev. Randolph replied, "Cover it up with paint." A few days later a deacon asked the pastor, "Where is the altar painting?" "It is where it has always been", said the pastor. Some of the older members of the congregation did not like the new altar; they thought it looked too much like that in a Catholic church.

In January, 1911, Dr. Peter Peterson began his work in Mamrelund. Many people could not understand why Dr. Peterson would leave the First Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, to answer the call to Stanton, but he apparently never regretted the move. Members of the Mamrelund Church were numerous enough to control the af-

fairs of the entire community. The town of Stanton was prosperous. The bank stood firm on solid foundation. The stores did a thriving business, the school was crowded. That period of 1911-1916 possibly marked the height of prosperity in this community. The inflation of land values of the post-world war period had not yet come. The people were content to till their farms, build their homes, increase their savings, and enjoy life.

Dr. Peterson was greatly interested in good music and he had Handel's "Messiah" rendered in the Stanton church for the first time in 1915. In the meantime, the organ had been moved from the balcony to the front of the church. It was during his ministry that the congregation bought eight acres northeast of town for a new cemetery.

Dr. Peterson, a powerful preacher and a pastor who put his whole soul into the work in his church, resigned on November 13, 1915, to accept a call from the Immanuel Church in Chicago. His last public appearance at Stanton was the seventieth anniversary celebration in the new church on Saturday afternoon, May 25, 1940. His part of that afternoon's program was to close with the benediction. Noting his condition, friends sought to dissuade him, but in vain. He walked to the altar, knelt there at length, and upon turning to the au-

dience he looked heavenward and cried, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul and forget not all His benefits." Then, turning from the altar, he raised his hand high and pronounced the benediction. He died in Chicago the following week.

The new pastor, Rev. O. A. Elmquist, preached his first sermon in Mamrelund on Sunday, October 1, 1916. The years he spent in this congregation were exacting and trying. World War I, with all its heartaches and tears, was being waged at that time. Seventy-three members of the congregation were called to the colors. Church and Sunday schools in any foreign language were forbidden for a time and the Swedish language never again regained its pre-war prestige in the congregation.

Dr. Elmquist believed in the study of the Bible; study classes were held during the week and the largest Bible class in the history of the church greeted him every Sunday morning. Rev. Elmquist resigned on June 22, 1922, to become Conference Field Secretary and that fall Rev. J. T. Kraft became the pastor of Mamrelund. He used English and Swedish equally well and some services were in English, others in Swedish. There was a large orchestra and always a splendid choir,

besides other smaller musical and singing organizations. A three-manual Moiller organ was purchased in 1928 for \$16,000.

Rev. Kraft resigned in the spring of 1933 and Rev. A. Leonard Smith, with his wife and two children, came on January 15, 1934, to take up the work at Mamrelund. Now, all the meetings of the congregation were to be held in the English language, but two services a month in Swedish were held during the hour before Sunday school. A memorable event of this period was the celebration, on April 29, 30, 1934, of the fiftieth anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone of the church. That Sunday morning, before a gathering of 1,085 people, a confirmation class of 50, 36 youths and 14 adults, made their vows.

Shortly after midnight, or early Sunday morning, August 28, 1938, the Mamrelund Lutheran Church of Stanton was destroyed by lightning and fire. A description of this fire was written by Rev. Smith: "Billows of smoke and fire pressed angrily at every window seeking a way out. The large window above the entrance was always beautiful to behold, but never like now. Its beautiful reproduction in colored opalescent glass of Thorwaldsen's statue of Christ with His outstretched arms and inviting hands seemed all at once to appear alive. How could He stand there

so unafraid, so calm, in the midst of such destructive fury? How like the Savior at all times;—and as long as He stood there not a flame was seen on the outside of the church. But when the window suddenly collapsed and Christ disappeared, instantly the church became enveloped by hungry flames leaping forth from every window."

In the light of the glowing embers, members of the congregation gathered a block away on the porch of the E. E. Mollenhoff home, and prayed for another church home. It was Sunday morning, 2:30 a.m. Paul's comment, "All things work together for good unto those who love the Lord" was the text for the sermon and Nehemiah's ringing challenge, "Come, and let us build", was its climax. Unaccompanied, but with power, the group closed this unusual service by singing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God".

The local school board announced at the close of that out-door service that the high school gymnasium would be available for all church services not in conflict with scheduled programs of the school. The offer was gratefully accepted and at 10 a.m. that day the Sunday school met in the school building; at 11 o'clock, the congregation assembled. After the service, the congregation went in a body to the ruins, where the cornerstone was opened and its contents examined. Every-

thing had been well preserved. The contents of the church vault had not fared so well. In the drop from the main floor to the basement the vault had opened, and many of the old records were destroyed.

On the Monday evening after the fire, the board of administration met at the parsonage to talk about a new Mamrelund and committees were nominated. At a special meeting May 1, 1939, it was agreed that the new church be entirely of stone.

The foundation stone of the old church was crushed by volunteer labor and used in the concrete of the new foundation. The bell was recast and placed in the new tower. The church is of Indiana Bedford stone and is of Gothic design. Its over-all dimensions are 50 feet by 116 feet, with a tower and spire 150 feet high. The ball and the cross atop the spire are of stainless steel. To the right of the chancel is the Pioneer Chapel. Above the entrance to the church is a huge balcony window, with a reproduction in stained cathedral glass of Thorwaldsen's statue of Christ, presented by non-members and non-resident confirmants and dedicated to the memory of the pioneer pastor, Rev. Bengt Magnus Halland.

One year was required for the erection of this church and its cost approximated \$100,000. On

Sunday, May 26, 1940, it was dedicated and the seventieth anniversary was celebrated. In 1944 the Mamrelund Lutheran Church became debt-free and the note was burned with ceremonies on June 9, 1944.

And so this biography of Mamrelund comes to a close. It is the story of "the little white town with the big white church"; it is dedicated to the faithful, courageous, industrious, God-fearing men and women who came as pioneers to Mamrelund.

LOIS A. MCINTOSH